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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 001639

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/04/2013

TAGS: MARR PREL DJ FAID

SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: ASSISTANCE CONFUSION

REF: DJIBOUTI 1633

Classified By: ADCM Haywood Rankin for reason 1.5 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Chief of Armed Forces Fathi conveyed to Charge September 3 President Guelleh's confusion and vexation -- directed mainly at Djibouti's ambassador in Washington -- about assistance from the United States. He said, perhaps too frankly, that Guelleh was nervous because he needed to begin his election campaign for 2005. Guelleh is supposed to return September 5 to Djibouti, after more than a month away, and Charge has requested an appointment. The fundamental problem is that the Djiboutians are accustomed to the simpler French way of handling assistance and have a steep learning curve with the Americans (and vice versa). End Summary.

¶2. (C) Chief of Staff of the Djibouti Armed Forces General Fathi Ahmed Houssein summoned Charge September 3. The final third of the conversation, which concerned Djibouti's ongoing expulsion of undocumented foreigners, is treated in reftel. Prior to the meeting, the embassy learned that the subject on Fathi's mind was a 1.7 million dollar bill for paving the ramp at the hangar for the presidential aircraft, for which the Djiboutian military expected to be reimbursed by the United States.

Presidential Plane and Olhaye

¶3. (C) Fathi opened the meeting saying he had hoped to get clarity on an issue of great importance to President Guelleh, relating to the presidential aircraft, but he realized he needed General Robeson and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to be present. CJTF-HOA Djibouti desk officer Michael dell' Amico presented General Robeson's apologies for "not being able to attend." Fathi said that President Guelleh was keen to get the presidential aircraft up from South Africa, where it resided at present, and to do so it was necessary that the work at the presidential hangar be finished.

¶4. (C) Fathi said that Djiboutians were having a very difficult time, in general, understanding what was agreed and not agreed on the part of the United States -- the presidential ramp and hangar being one example. President Guelleh, he said, was deeply agitated by the reporting that had come in from Ambassador Olhaye in Washington about U.S. assistance to Djibouti. Charge recalled the meeting which he had earlier attended in Washington with Ambassador Olhaye, concerning the East Africa Counterterrorism Initiative, and believed that the explanation given Olhaye had been relatively straightforward and that Olhaye had grasped it. However, Charge explained, there was no doubt that U.S. funding processes, whether civilian or military, were complex. Charge offered several examples of how different types of funding processes worked.

We are not the French

¶5. (C) Fathi said that at the military level Djiboutians were beginning to understand how the American system worked. He cited an example of military equipment that had been ordered in the year 2002 but which, it now appeared, would not arrive until 2005. USLO Major Anderson reminded Fathi that he, Fathi, had only signed the contract for this equipment three months ago. Fathi said, yes, now he was beginning to understand, and in general the Djiboutian military was beginning to get the picture. But President Guelleh was totally confused and completely troubled. Guelleh now told him that he understood nothing that had been reported by Ambassador Olhaye on the subject of U.S. assistance. Guelleh wanted to start all over. He wanted a clear, practical, down-to-earth, simple piece of paper that told him what Djibouti was going to get and when. The problem was, Fathi explained, that President Guelleh would begin next year his campaign for reelection in 2005. He needed already, now, to expedite payment of pensions and salaries, in preparation for that campaign. To do that he needed to know what money he was going to have in hand and when. When Guelleh had received the payment for the lease of Camp Lemonier, he had immediately used a portion of that cash to pay arrears of pensions and salaries. Djiboutians were now being paid promptly at the end of the month and knew to thank the United States.

16. (C) Charge said that he hoped to be seeing President Guelleh soon and would offer as good an explanation as he could. However, it was necessary to realize that the U.S. had a completely different system of providing assistance from France's. In the Charge's consultations in Paris the previous week, he had learned that France had promised Djibouti a total package of military and civilian expenditure in Djibouti of 55 million dollars annually; part of that package was an agreement that if the military component went down, the civilian component would go up in equal measure. It was a nice, clean system, but it bore no resemblance to the way the United States did business.

17. (C) Fathi said he did not ask the Americans to be French. Djibouti only asked for clarity. It did not need to know what assistance would cost the U.S. government (which, Charge pointed out, was what the U.S. government announces) but what Djibouti would receive. Fathi said that it would be preferable if the U.S. took out all expenses for overhead and administration that would reduce the net amount of assistance dollars realized in Djibouti, prior to giving Guelleh the monetary value of U.S. assistance. President Guelleh would be returning to Djibouti in a couple of days and he would need a firm list of what Djibouti would get, how much cash, how much in the way of projects, their value to Djibouti, and their execution dates.

18. (C) Fathi said that Djibouti had asked for nothing from the United States. It had gone through many lean years, and its nomadic populace could survive off of dates and water. It was the United States that had offered help, which was indeed desperately needed, and Djibouti just wanted to know what to expect. He realized that there was extremely good will on both sides, and that these were only the unavoidable problems of adaptation to each other's ways.

Comment

19. (C) Fathi enjoys a close relationship with Guelleh. He is one of Guelleh's four or five closest qat-chewers, which may explain why he was nominated -- or nominated himself -- to venture into the non-military assistance zone. In fact, there should not be much "lack of clarity" about non-military assistance. Djiboutian ministries on the receiving end of ESF handled by USAID are not complaining about lack of clarity. In the military field, Fathi has signed -- with Guelleh's consent -- a letter of request that obligates virtually all of the 25 million dollar East African Counterterrorism Initiative projects. But there is, indeed, a steep learning curve. Moreover, Djiboutians are tough negotiators and not averse to crying confusion as a negotiating ploy. Olhaye may be an impediment, as he appears to embellish his reports to Guelleh.

110. (C) Although elections in Djibouti are far from what they are in the west, Guelleh may well harbor election anxieties. The advent of the Americans has raised public expectations of American largesse. As the people do not see much immediate evidence of this supposed largesse, they suspect that their leader has pocketed or misspent it. Guelleh would like to deflect these suspicions. Fathi's other striking assertion -- that Guelleh used the lease money in part to pay salary and pension arrearages -- raises the question of what happened to the money budgeted for those salaries and underlines the lack of transparency in Djiboutian financial management.

SMITH